# Women Education in the Early 20th Century Bengal with reference to Begum Rokeya

## Summary of the Work

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***By***

**Antara Mitra**

**Department of Education**

**Swami Vivekananda University**

**Barrackpore, Kolkata 700121**

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**Introduction:**

The early 20th century marked a significant transformation in women's education in Bengal, closely linked to social reform movements during British colonial rule. Despite entrenched patriarchal norms and socio-economic disparities, this period witnessed pioneering efforts by figures like Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who ardently championed women's education.

Both Hindu and Muslim women faced substantial educational barriers—Hindu women due to rigid societal restrictions and purdah, and Muslim women owing to religious orthodoxy and economic hardship. Social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar primarily focused on the education of upper-caste Hindu women, inadvertently leaving Muslim women in a state of educational neglect (Chakravarti, 1998).

In response, Begum Rokeya emerged as a revolutionary force advocating for the education of Muslim girls. She established the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911, offering instruction in both secular and religious subjects (Sarkar, 2001). Through her influential writings, including *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya critiqued oppressive societal structures and envisioned a world of gender equality (Bagchi, 1996). Despite facing considerable resistance, she steadfastly upheld education as a fundamental right for women, laying the foundation for broader educational reforms. Rokeya's tireless efforts not only challenged the status quo but also inspired subsequent policy reforms and societal transformations, paving the way for more inclusive women's education in Bengal (Forbes, 2000).

**Women's Education in Early 20th Century Bengal:**

The early 20th century marked a transformative period for women's education in Bengal, influenced by colonial policies, social reform movements, and nationalist sentiments. Prior to the 19th century, women had limited access to formal education, with learning primarily restricted to domestic settings. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra

Vidyasagar, and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain played key roles in advocating for women's education (Chakravarti, 1998). Despite societal resistance, the spread of Western education and reformist ideals led to the establishment of schools for girls (Forbes, 2000). Begum Rokeya, a pioneer in Muslim women's education, founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911 (Bagchi, 1996). While cultural and economic barriers persisted, this period laid the foundation for future advancements in women's education, fostering their empowerment in social, political, and intellectual spheres (Sarkar, 2001).

**Short Biography of Begum Rokeya:**

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a pioneering feminist, educator, and social reformer in British India, particularly in Bengal. She dedicated her life to advocating for Muslim women's education and challenging restrictive societal norms (Bagchi, 1996). In 1911, she established the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Kolkata, providing education to Muslim girls despite societal resistance (Forbes, 2000). Her literary works, including *Sultana's Dream*, critiqued gender inequality and envisioned a society where women enjoyed equal rights (Sarkar, 2001). Rokeya's activism laid the foundation for future feminist movements in South Asia, inspiring generations of educators and activists (Chakravarti, 1998). Her legacy endures in educational institutions promoting women's empowerment. She remains a symbol of resilience and a beacon of hope for gender equality in the region.

**Research Objectives of the Study:**

The research aims to highlight the lasting impact of Begum Rokeya reformist ideas and their relevance in today's educational discourse.

- To examine the historical context of women's education in early 20th century Bengal
- To explore the life and works of Begum Rokeya
- To investigate Begum Rokeya's role in establishing educational institutions for women
- To analyze the educational reforms promoted by Begum Rokeya

- To assess the impact of Begum Rokeya's writings on women's education
- To explore the social and cultural challenges faced by women in Bengal during the early 20th century
- To study the reception of Begum Rokeya's ideas on women's education in Bengal's society
- To evaluate the long-term legacy of Begum Rokeya's work in the context of women's education in Bengal

**Research Questions of the Study:**

This study seeks to address key questions related to the role of Begum Rokeya in advancing women's education in early 20th century Bengal. By exploring her personal contributions, educational reforms, and the socio-cultural challenges she encountered, the research aims to uncover the transformative impact of her work on women's access to education. The research questions are designed to probe the historical context, the effectiveness of Rokeya's initiatives, and the reception of her ideas within Bengali society. By answering these questions, the study will shed light on the lasting legacy of Begum Rokeya's advocacy and its continued relevance in the discourse on gender equality and educational reform.

- What were the primary obstacles to women's education in early 20th century Bengal?
- How did Begum Rokeya's personal experiences shape her advocacy for women's education?
- What role did the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School play in the promotion of women's education in Bengal?
- What educational reforms did Begum Rokeya implement in her school and writings to promote women's literacy and empowerment?
- How did Begum Rokeya's literary works, such as *Sultana's Dream*, contribute to changing societal attitudes towards women's education and empowerment?

- What social and cultural challenges did women face in Bengal during the early 20th century, and how did Rokeya address these in her work?
- How were Begum Rokeya's ideas on women's education received by Bengal's society, particularly by the colonial government and the local elite?
- What is the long-term legacy of Begum Rokeya's work in the field of women's education, and how has it influenced future educational reforms in Bengal?

**Present Relevance of the Contribution of Begum Rokeya:**

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain remains a pivotal figure in South Asian feminist history, advocating for women's education and social reform in an era of widespread gender inequality. Her efforts in establishing the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911 played a transformative role in increasing access to education for Muslim girls, inspiring future educational institutions and policy reforms (Miah, 2021). Today, her legacy continues to shape global discussions on gender equality and education.

Rokeya's literary contributions, particularly *Sultana's Dream*, highlighted the power of education in challenging societal norms and promoting women's empowerment (Begum, 2018). Her writings critiqued gender oppression and envisioned a society where women held leadership roles. These themes remain relevant in contemporary feminist discourse, influencing movements advocating for equal rights and education worldwide (Hossain, 2020). Beyond education and literature, Rokeya was an active social reformer, addressing systemic barriers that hindered women's progress. Her essays, such as *The Need for Women's Education*, framed education as a societal obligation rather than a private matter, a perspective still echoed in modern gender advocacy (Khan, 2022).

Her influence extends into contemporary feminist movements, inspiring activists to challenge patriarchal structures. Organizations promoting women's rights in South Asia continue to draw from her vision, advocating for policies to ensure gender equity in education

and employment (Sarkar, 2001). The annual observance of Rokeya Day in Bangladesh serves as a testament to her enduring legacy, reinforcing the importance of education in women's empowerment (Chakravarti, 1998).

Begum Rokeya's contributions remain profoundly relevant, offering a blueprint for gender justice in education, literature, and social reform. Her work continues to inspire generations, proving that education is fundamental to achieving lasting societal transformation.

**Summary of the Study:**

This study examines the role of women's education in early 20th-century Bengal, with a particular focus on the contributions of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, one of the most prominent advocates for women's rights and education during this period. The early 20th century in Bengal was a time of significant social and cultural transformation, marked by the rise of reform movements that aimed to address the educational and social inequalities faced by women. Against the backdrop of colonial rule and traditional gender norms, Rokeya emerged as a pioneering figure who challenged these societal structures and advocated for women's intellectual and social empowerment.

**Objective 1: To examine the historical context of women's education in early 20th century Bengal**

The early 20th century in Bengal was a period of significant socio-political and cultural change. Under British colonial rule, educational policies focused on creating a subservient workforce, and the education system largely excluded women due to entrenched patriarchal norms. Women were often confined to the domestic sphere, and their education was limited, if provided at all. In Bengal, education for women was rare, usually restricted to moral or religious teachings within the home.

**Objective 2: To explore the life and works of Begum Rokeya**

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born into a Muslim family and received informal education, primarily from her elder brother. She learned Bengali, English, and later became an outspoken advocate for women's rights and education. Her progressive views were further shaped by her marriage to Sakhawat Hossain, a forward-thinking Muslim man who encouraged her intellectual development. Her writings, including essays and short stories, emphasize gender equality and social change through women's education.

**Objective 3: To investigate Begum Rokeya's role in establishing educational institutions for women**

Rokeya was instrumental in establishing educational institutions for women in colonial Bengal, a time when women's education was considered disruptive to societal norms. In 1911, she founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Kolkata, one of the first schools for Muslim girls in Bengal. The school was a beacon of modern education, offering subjects like science and mathematics alongside literature and history, providing a formal education that was rare for women at the time.

**Objective 4: To analyze the educational reforms promoted by Begum Rokeya**

Begum Rokeya's reforms advocated for the inclusion of women in the formal education system, challenging traditional gender roles that relegated women to domestic duties. She promoted a curriculum that not only addressed traditional subjects but also introduced modern, progressive elements, such as science. Through her writings and activism, she laid the groundwork for educational reforms that aimed to empower women and challenge the patriarchal systems in place.

**Objective 5: To assess the impact of Begum Rokeya's writings on women's education**

Rokeya's literary works, especially Sultana's Dream (1905), served as powerful vehicles for promoting women's education and social change. In her visionary work, she imagined a

world where educated women led and governed, demonstrating the transformative potential of women's intellectual empowerment. Through her allegorical works, she critiqued the societal norms that restricted women's access to education and advocated for their inclusion in public and intellectual life.

**Objective 6: To explore the social and cultural challenges faced by women in Bengal during the early 20th century**

Women in early 20th-century Bengal faced immense social and cultural challenges. Patriarchy confined them to domestic roles, and educational opportunities were severely limited. Women were expected to marry early and dedicate their lives to family and household duties. The prevailing cultural ideals of the 'sati' and 'pativrata' further reinforced their subjugation, rendering education a secondary concern. Despite these challenges, reform movements began to question and confront these norms.

**Objective 7: To study the reception of Begum Rokeya's ideas on women's education in Bengal's society**

Rokeya's ideas on women's education were groundbreaking and met with resistance in conservative Bengal's society. However, her advocacy laid the foundation for future educational reforms. The founding of her school and her writings contributed to a growing discourse on gender equality. Her ideas resonated with reformers and intellectuals, and though initially controversial, they helped spark a broader movement for women's empowerment in Bengal.

**Objective 8: To evaluate the long-term legacy of Begum Rokeya's work in the context of women's education in Bengal**

Begum Rokeya's contributions left an enduring impact on women's education in Bengal. After her death in 1932, the increasing number of schools for girls, particularly in Muslim communities, reflected the success of her vision. Her work extended beyond educational reforms to social reforms, including campaigns against child marriage and

polygamy. Her holistic approach to women's liberation has inspired generations of feminists and educators in South Asia and beyond.

**Conclusion:**

The study of women's education in early 20th-century Bengal, particularly through the work of Begum Rokeya, highlights education's transformative role in social reform. At a time when women's education was widely discouraged, Rokeya championed it as essential for intellectual and social liberation. She not only advocated for women's rights but also took concrete action by founding the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911, providing Muslim girls access to formal education (Islam, 2006).

Rokeya's writings, especially *Sultana's Dream* (1905), critiqued patriarchal structures and envisioned a society where women held power, reinforcing her commitment to gender equality (Mookherjee, 2012). Despite opposition from conservative factions, her efforts laid the groundwork for future feminist and educational movements. Her legacy continues to inspire women's rights and education reforms in South Asia, affirming that education remains a crucial tool for empowerment and social justice.

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